

**Advancing the Practice of Food Stamp Nutrition Education Evaluation:
Art and Science
SNE FSNE WORKSHOP
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Concluding Comments: Identifying the Next Steps

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First, I want to commend the Society for Nutrition Education for having the vision to identify the need for this workshop and to work so hard, along with the Planning Committee, to make it such an inclusive, thought-provoking event. I particularly commend them for reaching out to social science and evaluation researchers; that interdisciplinary perspective has definitely enriched the workshop.

As I listened to the speakers and the group discussions at this workshop, I thought about what their comments suggested for future directions in research and evaluation. Several potential research topics jumped out; among them were:

- Development of a Short Set of Survey Questions to Assess Key Behavioral Outcomes of Food Stamp Nutrition Education (FSNE)
 - This was the most consistently emphasized research need. Several individuals recommended that a commitment be made to the sustained research effort necessary to develop and validate an agreed-upon set of questions. This set of questions could serve as a “common core” that could be used for synthesis of evaluation activities. Several attendees also noted that the diversity of state programs might lead some states to augment that common core with additional evaluation questions and activities. To develop the “common core” question set, it was recommended that researchers avoid reinventing the wheel—that is, start by examining existing behavioral checklist(s) being used by community nutrition programs serving low-income households and the research that has been done to establish their validity and reliability.
- Identification and/or Adaptation of Existing Cost-Effective Methods of Data Collection
 - Several respondents recommended that FSNE programs make use of existing data collections whenever possible. Examples frequently cited by workshop attendees were CDC’s state-based surveillance data collections, such as the Behavioral Risk Factor Surveillance System (BRFSS). Attendees noted that working with existing data collection mechanisms means that FSNE programs can make use of data already being collected, and that generally this approach should be more cost-effective than trying to develop and conduct a single-purpose data collection. However, to get adequate representation of FSNE target populations, it may be necessary to pay not only for additional questions, but also for an augmented

sample; both costs of adding questions and augmenting sample may need to be considered.

- Development of Efficient Electronic Web-Based Reporting Systems
 - Web-based systems were particularly of interest to attendees, for their ability to easily pull in data from distant sites, be integrated at the regional and national level, and to link to other data resources. Their utility in efficiently meeting the multiple reporting requirements typical of state FSNE programs is clear. If well designed, they could also be useful for evaluation purposes. Information on the characteristics of FSNE participants could be useful in assessing how well FSNE is reaching the broad range of food stamp participants, for example.
- Development of a Community Indicators Checklist
 - A need was expressed to better measure community-level FSNE activities. A short tool focusing on community-level measures could be useful in this regard. For its development, it would be important to identify community characteristics that support the goals of FSNE and which FSNE could reasonably be expected to affect. CDC speakers noted that while there is consensus on the important community factors for some health promotion areas (e.g. tobacco cessation), this is not true for nutrition. Therefore, a first step is to identify important community level factors for promoting the nutritional well-being of low-income audiences.
- Exploration of Data Collection Methods Not Relying on Self-Report
 - The potential use of supermarket scanner data as a means of evaluating FSNE effects on food purchasing patterns was frequently mentioned. This could be useful as a means of evaluating FSNE and also as an external validation of FSNE evaluation methods that rely on self-report. ERS has funded an evaluation of a WIC nutrition education program that collects both purchase information and administrative data (1); similar types of studies might be useful for FSNE.
- Program Development Research
 - A notable feature of FSNE has been the freedom States enjoy to develop their own programming. This has resulted in tremendous diversity in nutrition education efforts across States and even within States. With such a range of educational approaches, it is inevitable that there is interest in determining which approaches have the most success. FNS has asked States to highlight “promising programs” as a part of their annual planning and reporting process. Sharing information about promising programs is likely to spur interest in how to go “from promising to proven” – that is, determining whether promising programs actually are better at educating the FSNE audience and promoting healthier dietary behavior. Evaluation of model programs is typically approached via experimental or quasi-experimental methods (2). Given the costs of such evaluation studies, it may not be possible to rigorously evaluate the effectiveness of very many programs. Therefore, the decisions as to which promising programs to focus on for further investigation and evaluation will be difficult. Each of us would probably have our own criteria--how strong is the preliminary indication of effectiveness? What about the practical considerations of cost-effectiveness and feasibility of expansion to a broad range of FSNE sites?

This is my list—others may have a longer or slightly different list. However, I'm sure that all of us will agree that the workshop suggested a number of research topics that need to be pursued as part of our strategy for improving evaluation of Food Stamp Nutrition Education.

Identifying research topics is the first step. Next comes the difficult task of developing and implementing the necessary research plans to act on these ideas. This list is too ambitious for any one person or agency to carry out by itself. The challenge for all of the individuals and agencies represented here will be to identify the research topics most interesting and relevant to their overall research agenda, and pursue them further. I hope that all participants in the workshop will return to their workplaces with plans to do just that. I also hope that we all can continue the communication about research and evaluation that has been a hallmark of this workshop.

References:

1. *Evaluating Changes in WIC Participant Food Purchasing as a Result of WIC Nutrition Education*. Access at:
<http://www.ers.usda.gov/Briefing/FoodNutritionAssistance/projects/>
2. *Effects of Food Assistance and Nutrition Programs on Nutrition and Health: Volume 1, Research Design*. By William L. Hamilton and Peter H. Rossi. ERS Food Assistance and Nutrition Research Report No. FANRR19-1. 39 pp, February 2002.